

SUPPORTING LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ONTARIO'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

*Discussion Paper for a
Province-Wide Consultation*





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Pour appuyer l'apprentissage et l'enseignement dans les écoles élémentaires de l'Ontario : Document de discussion pour une consultation provinciale.

This publication is available on the Ministry of Education's website,
at www.edu.gov.on.ca.

ABOUT THE CONSULTATION

This province-wide consultation is being conducted by the Working Group on the Elementary Curriculum to gather your perspectives and insights on Ontario's curriculum for Grades 1 to 8 and your thoughts about learning and teaching in Ontario's elementary schools.

The working group was appointed by the Minister of Education, in consultation with the Curriculum Council, to examine the elementary curriculum in general and to respond in particular to concerns that the curriculum is "overcrowded". The findings of the working group will provide a foundation for the Curriculum Council as it develops recommendations regarding the curriculum for the Minister of Education. These recommendations will inform the development of the elementary component of a new ministry document outlining policies and programs for Ontario schools, from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

The working group is co-chaired by Jean-Luc Bernard, Director of Education, Conseil scolaire de district du Centre-Sud-Ouest, and Gerry Connelly, Former Director of Education, Toronto District School Board.

The Ministry of Education strives to promote a strong and vibrant publicly funded education system that is focused on three goals:

- High levels of student achievement
- Reduced gaps in student achievement
- High levels of public confidence in public education

To achieve these goals, the Ministry of Education is focusing its efforts on:

- identifying and supporting effective teaching, learning, and assessment practices;
- identifying and supporting effective approaches to reducing gaps in achievement among Ontario students;
- engaging students, families, and communities in building supportive learning environments;
- increasing system effectiveness, efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness.

The consultation process involves two phases. Initially, the working group conducted research to inform the present discussion paper. This research involved a public survey, posted on the ministry website in late June 2009, and a focus group of teachers, which was convened in order to ensure that the voice of practising teachers would be reflected in information collected to inform this discussion paper. In the initial phase, the working group also conducted secondary research on curriculum trends and practices in jurisdictions around the world.

In the current phase of the consultation process, the working group is providing opportunities for students, parents,¹ parent groups, school boards, educators, stakeholders, and other interested members of the public across Ontario to respond electronically to a survey that poses the questions presented in this discussion paper (pages 13–15). (Both the discussion paper and the survey are available on the ministry website, at www.edu.gov.on.ca.) In addition, a series of consultation meetings and focus group sessions will be held across the province in October 2009.

The report of the working group will be based on findings from this broad, province-wide consultation and from the primary and secondary research conducted earlier.

In the interest of gathering *all* points of view on the elementary curriculum, this discussion paper provides three distinct sets of questions tailored to the unique perspectives of the following three groups:

- parents, parent groups, and community members
- teachers, school and board leaders, associations, federations, faculties of education, and others working in the field of education
- students and student groups

We thank you for your contribution to this important process.

1. In this document, *parents(s)* is used to refer to parent(s) and guardian(s).

ONTARIO'S ELEMENTARY CURRICULUM

Teachers use the curriculum policy documents and all additional policies and resources to support learning and teaching in their classrooms. The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing Ontario's province-wide elementary and secondary curriculum. Some of the key features of the current elementary curriculum, and of the process of review and revision of the curriculum policy documents that the ministry conducts on an ongoing basis, are outlined below.

The curriculum

The Ontario curriculum is designed to help every student reach his or her full potential through a program of learning that is coherent, relevant, and age-appropriate. It recognizes that, today and in the future, students need to be critically literate in order to synthesize information, make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and thrive in an ever-changing global community. The curriculum also recognizes that the needs of learners are diverse, and helps all learners develop the knowledge, skills, and perspectives they need to be informed, productive, caring, responsible, healthy, and active citizens in their own communities and in the world.

How teachers use the curriculum

Ontario's elementary curriculum is set out in a series of curriculum policy documents that are developed by educators on the basis of an extensive consultation process. The elementary curriculum identifies what students must know and be able to do across a number of subjects or program areas: the arts, health and physical education, French as a second language, language, mathematics, Native languages, science and technology, social studies, history, and geography. Teachers use the curriculum as a foundation for planning a program of classroom learning geared to the needs of their students. Curriculum documents can be viewed on the ministry website at www.edu.gov.on.ca.

"Through the cyclical curriculum review process, the Ministry of Education has continued to refine and improve the curriculum documents in each of the subject areas ..."

Letter to the Minister of Education from the Former Chair of the Curriculum Council (March 2008)

How the curriculum documents are reviewed and updated

In 2003, the Ministry of Education began a curriculum review process in which the curriculum policy document for every subject is reviewed and revised on a seven-year cycle. This important process is intended to ensure that the curriculum remains current and relevant, and that it is age-appropriate for students in every grade. The review is based on extensive research and consultation, and culminates in the work of writing teams comprising educators from across Ontario who have specialized subject expertise. Some of the changes introduced as a result of recent reviews include the following:

- a reduction in the amount of content in each subject
- the addition of examples and other features to assist teachers in lesson preparation and planning
- the provision of more information to assist teachers in supporting English language learners, planning programs for students with special education needs, using technology, and other important aspects of program planning and classroom instruction
- the embedding of expectations that allow students to develop literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills in all subjects
- the alignment of curriculum expectations with current policy initiatives, such as those in the areas of environmental education (*Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow: A Policy Framework for Environmental Education in Ontario Schools*, 2009); Aboriginal education (*Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*, 2004); equity and inclusive education (*Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, 2009); and French-language education (*Politique d'aménagement linguistique de l'Ontario pour l'éducation en langue française*, 2004).

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WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

As noted earlier, the Working Group on the Elementary Curriculum initially conducted research to gather background information that would inform the development of this discussion guide. The working group also researched approaches to elementary curriculum in other jurisdictions within Canada and around the world.

Participants in an online survey and a teachers' focus group responded to four general questions about the elementary curriculum. Their responses are summarized in the sections that follow.

It is important to note that the responses and feedback indicated an understanding of "curriculum" that takes in more than just the expectations contained in the curriculum documents. Respondents tended to see curriculum as the sum total of program-related activities, experiences, and learning opportunities, both formal and informal, for which a teacher takes responsibility. Consequently, for many respondents, "overcrowding" was not only about the amount of academic content that needed to be covered but also about the need to address social, physical, emotional, cultural, and developmental aspects of learning. Feedback was also provided about the need for teachers to take into account various school, board, and ministry initiatives that impact student learning.

Respondents' suggested priorities for student learning

The working group asked people what they thought the learning priorities for Ontario students should be, and their suggestions included the following (listed in random order).

As a result of their learning, students should:

- have respect for themselves and others, and work collaboratively with others to resolve conflicts with care, trust, and integrity;
- appreciate Canada, its identity, and achievements, and understand their role and responsibilities as contributing, respectful citizens of Canada and the world;

The Ontario government is committed to providing students with the best public education in the world, measured by high levels of achievement and engagement for all students. Successful learning outcomes will give all students the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to fulfil their potential, to pursue lifelong learning, and to contribute to a prosperous, cohesive society.

- think in innovative and creative ways and engage in exploration and self-discovery;
- think critically, make connections and inferences, engage in critical questioning, and arrive at reasoned conclusions and informed decisions;
- have the knowledge, skills, and perspectives they need to be environmentally active and responsible citizens, to be aware of their own carbon footprint, and to develop a sense of stewardship for the natural environment;
- accept, appreciate, and respect others, without regard to ability, language, ethnicity, religion, sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation;
- understand our place in a global community, recognize multiple world views and perspectives, and be aware of global issues and events;
- be physically active; engage in positive practices that support health, nutrition, and fitness; and be prepared to make healthy choices;
- value and appreciate learning; know how to learn; have disciplined and responsible work, study, and learning habits; and be prepared to become a lifelong learner;
- write effectively, read critically and with comprehension, and be able to communicate in various ways;
- understand mathematical concepts and possess mathematical skills that they are able to apply practically in daily life;
- have strong problem-solving skills, including the ability to engage in authentic inquiry and to adapt to new information and situations;
- be knowledgeable about, and skilled in using, current technologies, and appreciate both their benefits and risks.

Supporting implementation of suggested learning priorities

The working group asked participants what supports should be in place to help implement the learning priorities they had indicated. Their responses included the following:

- Develop a compilation of the “big ideas” across all subjects and grades to provide a context for all instruction
- Provide more supports for classroom implementation (e.g., print resources to support instruction in combined grades, exemplars, appropriate technologies)
- Allow for a longer implementation cycle for revised curriculum
- Build capacity to support teaching and learning in schools (e.g., provide support for teacher-leaders at the school level)

Enhancing curriculum implementation

The working group asked participants what they thought would enhance the implementation of the curriculum. Their responses included the following:

- Providing opportunities for hands-on learning, and including more manipulatives to help students learn
- Providing more in-class support for students (e.g., more education assistants, new technology in the classroom)
- Providing more resources for teachers, such as the ministry’s “Guides to Effective Instruction” in reading, literacy, and mathematics
- Increasing the range of electronic supports for implementing the curriculum and for teacher development
- Having teachers engage in more job-embedded professional learning, and allowing for teacher-directed professional learning

Overall comments

The working group asked people to share their thoughts about the elementary curriculum overall, and their concerns included the following:

- Ensuring that the curriculum is engaging and relevant for a wide variety of students, in order to make equitable outcomes for all learners possible and to focus on the development of the whole child
- Addressing the "overcrowdedness" of the curriculum (Comments included the following: "coherence across the curriculum", "less is more", "go deeper on fewer topics", "address breadth and depth for improved student learning".)
- Examining conditions and structures at the school level that affect teaching and learning (e.g., combined grades, class size, adequate time in the school day for planning)

It is important to note that the feedback summarized above is consistent with the working group's findings from secondary research with respect to new directions and trends in elementary curriculum that are being reported in other jurisdictions.

GUIDELINES AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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This section provides guidelines and discussion questions to structure consultations in meetings and focus group sessions with board teams and various stakeholder groups. Boards will also use this discussion paper and the questions that follow to facilitate local discussions that may form the basis for a "group response" to the online survey. (The questions provided here also appear in the online survey, which allows for both individual and group responses.) Boards may wish to include students and parents in their local response processes.

The subject of this consultation is broad in scope – it is intended to examine the elementary curriculum and its implementation in Ontario schools, as well as the perceived issue of "overcrowdedness". For the purposes of this consultation, and consistent with information gathered in the initial phase of research, "curriculum" may be taken to include the content of expectations in the policy documents as well as activities, experiences, and learning opportunities, both formal and informal, for which a teacher takes responsibility. These may relate to both the expectations themselves and to various ministry and board initiatives that impact student learning.

The guidelines and questions provided here are designed to ensure that participants have an opportunity to comment on the full range of topics and issues that are relevant to the consultation. In order to contribute effectively to the consultation, please focus your responses and comments on these broad questions, and try to avoid details that are beyond the scope of the consultation.

Within the scope of this consultation

This consultation provides participants with opportunities to discuss the following:

- Directions for future revision of the elementary curriculum
- Strategies for planning an integrated program as well as aligning curriculum with relevant aspects of current ministry policies and initiatives
- Ideas for overall streamlining of the curriculum (e.g., identifying big ideas that are shared across subject areas)
- Delivery of the curriculum in classrooms and schools
- Professional learning and resources that would support delivery
- Opportunities to introduce flexibility and to tailor delivery to student needs
- Parent and community support of student learning

Outside the scope of this consultation

The following topics are outside the scope of this consultation:

- Assessment, evaluation, and reporting, which have recently been the subject of an extensive province-wide consultation
- Specific details in the content of the curriculum (e.g., the study of a particular battle in the War of 1812)
- Kindergarten and Early Learning, which are being considered in a separate process
- Programming for students with special education needs, which has been the subject of separate discussions
- Funding issues, including those relating to class size, which have been the subject of separate discussions

YOUR OPINION MATTERS!

Your observations and suggestions are critically important, and will inform the final report of the Working Group on the Elementary Curriculum. To ensure that your voice is heard, keep in mind that suggestions that fall outside the scope of the consultation may not be considered.

To access this discussion paper and the online survey electronically, visit the ministry website at one of the following addresses:

- Teachers: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/curriculum.html
- Students: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/students/
- Parents: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/curriculum.html
- Administrators: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/

The working group looks forward to your participation, and appreciates your valuable contribution to this process.

Questions for parents, parent groups, and community members

The Working Group on the Elementary Curriculum has been directed to examine the elementary curriculum, and the question of "overcrowdedness" of the curriculum.

1. From your perspective as a parent or community member:
 - a) Do you think that the elementary curriculum is "overcrowded"? Yes / No
 - b) Please explain what "overcrowded" means to you.
2. a) Referring to the themes listed in the box on this page, please identify, in order of priority, the three themes that you think need to be focused on to a greater degree in the elementary curriculum.
 - b) Why are these your top choices?
 - c) What would you add to the themes listed in the box? Why?
 - d) Of the themes listed, which one(s) does your child need the most support in learning?
 - e) What form should this support take?
3. In your opinion, what would make the curriculum – what students learn in school – more engaging for all students? (Suggestions might include the relevance of the material to students, the balance of topics explored, whether teaching approaches meet students' needs, and so on.)
4. Parental and community support are important to help students engage in their learning. What could you do to show your support?
5. What additional comments or suggestions would you like to share about the elementary curriculum?

For your convenience, the following list of broad themes (presented in alphabetical order) summarizes the learning priorities identified by research participants (described on pp. 8–9 of this document).

- Character education / citizenship education / social skills
- Creative thinking skills
- Critical literacy
- Environmental education
- Equity / diversity / inclusiveness
- Global perspective
- Healthy choices and active living
- Learning skills and work habits
- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Problem-solving skills
- Technologies / Information technology

Questions for educators and stakeholder groups

The Working Group on the Elementary Curriculum has been directed to examine the elementary curriculum, and the question of “overcrowdedness” of the curriculum.

1. Based on your experience as an educator:
 - a) Do you think the elementary curriculum is “overcrowded”? Yes / No
 - b) Please explain what “overcrowded” means to you.
2. a) Referring to the themes listed in the box on this page, please identify, in order of priority, the three themes that you think need to be focused on to a greater degree in the elementary curriculum.
 - b) Why are these your top choices?
 - c) What would you add to the themes listed in the box? Why?
 - d) Of the themes listed, which one(s) call for the most support for implementation?
3. In your opinion, how could the curriculum be made more engaging for all students (e.g., relevance of material, balance of topics, meeting students’ needs)?
4. How might more flexibility be built into the curriculum so that teachers can tailor delivery of the curriculum to the needs of their students and thereby help to improve student learning?
5. In working with the curriculum:
 - a) What strategies have you used to create an integrated program of study?
 - b) What advice would you provide to the working group on effective integration of subjects?
 - c) How can the curriculum be most effectively aligned with new policies and initiatives?
6. As noted on pages 6–7, the current curriculum review process involves extensive consultation and writing by educators from across the province to develop current, relevant, and age-appropriate subject-based curriculum for Ontario students.

What advice would you provide to inform future revisions of the curriculum that will meet the needs of students in the year 2020?
7. What is needed to support successful implementation of the curriculum, now and in the future?
8. What additional comments or suggestions would you like to share about the elementary curriculum?

For your convenience, the following list of broad themes (presented in alphabetical order) summarizes the learning priorities identified by research participants (described on pp. 8–9 of this document).

- Character education / citizenship education / social skills
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- Healthy choices and active living
- Learning skills and work habits
- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Problem-solving skills
- Technologies / Information technology

Questions for students and student groups

1. a) What are the three **most important** things in this box that students in elementary school need to learn about in order to be successful in high school and beyond?
b) What made you choose these three things?
c) Is there anything you would add to the list of items in the box that you think are important for you to learn?
d) Of the items listed in the box, which ones do you need the most help with?
e) What kind of help would be most useful, and from whom?
2. a) How often do you feel you have too much to learn at school (e.g., too much work to do in class)?
Always ___ Often ___ Sometimes ___ Never ___
b) How often do you wish you had more time to learn about a topic or to practise a skill?
Always ___ Often ___ Sometimes ___ Never ___
3. What would make learning more interesting and more enjoyable for you and the other students in your class? (*Examples might include: group activities in which students work closely together and are comfortable with each other; interactive lessons; use of current technologies; more hands-on learning; more choice in projects and assignments.*)
4. What helps you to learn and to be successful in school? (*Examples might include: learning workshops that focus on work habits and teamwork skills; personalized teaching that is adapted to students' needs; positive encouragement.*)
5. What other comments or suggestions would you like to make about the elementary curriculum or about your learning at school?

- Becoming a caring and responsible person and citizen, and having good social skills
- Thinking creatively
- Thinking critically
- Understanding and caring about the environment
- Understanding and caring about fairness, diversity, and inclusion
- Having a global perspective
- Making healthy choices and participating in active living
- Having good learning skills and work habits
- Having good literacy skills
- Having good numeracy skills
- Having good problem-solving skills
- Understanding and using current technologies, including Information technology

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